

THE SUNDAY FOCUS

Weekly Worship from Gladsmuir & Longniddry Parish Churches

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Today's Bible reading

Matthew 6:1-15 ("Concerning Almsgiving and Prayer")

"Beware of practising your piety before others in order to be seen by them; for then you have no reward from your Father in heaven.

"So whenever you give alms, do not sound a trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, so that they may be praised by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. But when you give alms, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, so that your alms may be done in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.

"And whenever you pray, do not be like the hypocrites; for they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners, so that they may be seen by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. But whenever you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.

"When you are praying, do not heap up empty phrases as the Gentiles do; for they think that they will be heard because of their many words. Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him.

"Pray then in this way:

Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name. Your kingdom come. Your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.

Give us this day our daily bread.

And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors.

And do not bring us to the time of trial, but rescue us from the evil one.

For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you; but if you do not forgive others, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses."

Amen. (NRSV)

Today's hymns

Once in royal David's city (CH315) The race that long in darkness pined (CH290)

See! in yonder manger low (CH313) Love came down at Christmas (CH316)

Unto us a boy is born (CH331) Joy to the world (CH320)

The man with the long white hair and matching beard cut a solitary figure across the city with his Timberwolves cap and shabby dungarees. You might easily imagine he had just rolled into downtown Minneapolis from some distant pig farm like a superannuated prodigal son. But this retired schoolteacher had known only a life of inner city living. As for those around him, they had no idea of the scale of his vision and the depth of his talent. A deliberately hidden talent.

To the average passer-by this man looked nothing like the standard caricature of a monk. But behave like one he surely did. Spiritual rhythms and patterns of prayer had become his unfailing rule of life. Rising at 5am he would throw wide the window of his little bedroom and breathe deeply, speaking in whispers to the God who had bestowed on him another day of living. After a period of reflection in front of his war-torn Bible there would be a simple bite of breakfast (the radio news as his companion) before a long walk around the streets of his neighbourhood, buying necessities and gently greeting his neighbours and their dogs on the banks of the great Mississippi. After a coffee he would wend his way homeward to devote the rest of his day to a spiritual practice which had become both his calling and his passion. And all behind closed doors.

His studio was nothing more than the repurposed pantry off his kitchen. It sported a tiny table, a chair and his magnifying lamp. Here, one of the world's most famously anonymous – and most successfully evasive – painters worked in total seclusion, creating religious works of almost frightening beauty. For from this plain little apartment in an unassuming block on a regular city street, creations of unimagined wonder emerged from darkness into light – oil paintings on plain, flat rocks.

In all his years as a practising artist, the only personal detail he had ever publicly divulged had been shared through the signature on each of his works. It read simply: "The Missioner". Far more a job description than a name, it conveyed a sense of divine purpose – a purpose which had occupied his waking hours for decades. Each painted stone of The Missioner was brought into being in the hope of guiding troubled souls into the presence of God Incarnate through the beauty of fine art. Every one of the rocks which passed through his hands would come to bear an image of the Christ child, sent out as a life-changing gift to a person in need.

The Missioner's work had first come to light 30 winters earlier when, one snowy late November morning in the suburbs of St Paul, Minnesota, a young woman named Annie crackled across the snow to empty her overflowing mailbox. Among its many contents was an unassuming package wrapped in brown paper. Life had been tough these last eleven months since the death of her husband John. Now she and the boys were alone, each of the three silently dreading the days of emptiness which lay ahead. Back in the warmth of her little home, she looked at the parcel which had turned up so unexpectedly, her name and address written in the most beguiling of hands. As she set about opening it, Bruce and Johnny came running. In no more than a few seconds the deed was done, the object revealed for all to see.

"Aaaaaw!" gasped the boys in unison as their eyes alighted upon a painting of rarest delicacy, depicting the baby Jesus lying in a manger of finely detailed straw, a tiny field mouse perched on top of the pile. The breath-taking image was captivating, created with all the vibrancy of a Pre-Raphaelite master. The infant was looking up at them, eyes connecting with those of the troubled family by the Christmas tree.

"Wait 'til I tell Mandy!" yelled the older brother in wild excitement.

“And I’ll go and find Josh! Right away!” echoed the younger boy. Off they ran in their different directions with their good news of great joy, which soon would be spread far and wide across young families of the neighbourhood and beyond.

In the days leading up to Christmas a less than heavenly host of journalists took an interest. Before long, curiously similar stories began springing up across the country. In Miami, for example, a stone painting of a Mother and Child had been found by a patient on a hospital ward. The image was different yet the hand was the same and the message clear for all to read: “Behold, a virgin shall be with child.”

From San Jose to Portland, Maine, The Missioner’s parcels mysteriously made their way to frequently forgotten corners: a prison canteen, a picket line, a food bank, the shell of a fire-bombed church. TV networks took up whatever leads they could find, yet each scoop would run aground. December passed and January too, with the unknown artist remaining as he wanted to be: incognito.

The same, however, could not be said for the recipients of his masterpieces, many of whom were pleased go public with reports of big offers received yet declined – opportunities to sell a work of The Missioner. One unnamed collector, it was rumoured, had approached a homeless woman in New York with a cheque for a six-figure sum, only to be rebuffed. No, she wanted her unexpected gift to be exhibited for all to marvel at, in a big municipal gallery. And there it would remain.

Each winter new parcels were mailed out to The Missioner’s small and trusted team of conspirators. The artworks might end up beneath a Philadelphia railway bridge on the first of December or at the vending machines of a Detroit bus station on Christmas Eve. One even made it into The White House (for a mailroom clerk).

Public fascination only grew as the years turned to decades. Who *was* this invisible genius of the paint brush? And what the thinking behind his project? How had an endless flow of painted rocks gone to thousands of people who found their lives lit up in an untameable glow of love? The secrecy was captivating, yet the perpetrator of this decades-long battle against the darkness never once showed his face.

One cold February morning, The Missioner was in one of his daily haunts, Joey’s Diner. This was a special place where he always felt at home amid the tinkling of cutlery and the rapid-fire chatter of the friendly waitresses. In front of him was the discarded case of his bran muffin, an empty coffee cup and that day’s *New York Times*. Immersed in thought, he hardly noticed the neatly dressed woman who had slid in by his side, joining him in the booth.

“Oh, my word – if it isn’t John Patrick Carter! It must be 50 years. Christine Doherty. St Peter’s High? Class of ’67? Pat, I would recognise you *a mile away*.”

“Chrissie? ... Forgive me, of course it is!” he sighed joyfully, a young girl’s gentle smile flashing across his memory. “How wonderful! How ... *truly* ... wonderful.”

Ordering a large pot of mint tea and cinnamon toast for two, the teenage sweethearts looked deep into each other’s eyes, suddenly reclaiming their innocent youth in a diner which had meant so much to them those many years ago.

“You know,” Chrissie said, “I always knew we would meet again, someday, on one of my trips home to visit Dad. God bless us! What a thrill it is to see you, and looking so well. Tell me Pat, what you been up to since I went into the Convent?”

“Well, Sister,” drawled her old boyfriend with a chuckle, playing for time as he chose his words, “you know how it is. Bin keepin’ my head down, teachin’ high school art across the inner city. A quiet life really ... just doin’ the work o’ the Lord.”

Pause for Pondering

You might like to spend some time reflecting on today's story-sermon, with the help of the following questions:

1. In Matthew 6, the Sermon on the Mount places great emphasis on simple prayer and unseen generosity. How does the Missioner's life match up to Jesus' teaching? And how might we use the same passage to rejuvenate our own faith?
2. Pat lives modestly, close to God, yet changes the world in big ways and small. Do you envy his faithfulness? Or do you find it alien to your way of believing?
3. What would you do if a stunningly beautiful artwork from The Missioner were to arrive unannounced on your doorstep?
4. If you were to continue writing this story, what would Chrissie and Pat say and do next?

Weekly Updates ...

Charitable offerings: Each festive season the offerings of our various services on Christmas Eve and Christmas day are split in two directions: "home" and "away". This year we will be seeking to help out two very familiar partner charities of our congregations, in the form of the Church of Scotland's social care agency, CrossReach (to benefit their Perinatal Counselling Service which has served a great many young families in very positive ways in a programme spanning than 30 years), and Christian Aid's "No crib for a bed" Christmas Appeal, focusing on young families in the Democratic Republic of Congo.

Christmas and Epiphany services: Everyone is welcome at both Gladsmuir and Longniddry Parish Churches as together we focus on the wonder of Jesus' birth. Here is a list of our services from the last Sunday of Advent onwards:

Sunday 21st December:

Lessons and Carols (Longniddry, 9:45am*);
Lessons and Carols (Gladsmuir, 11am);
"Longest Night" Bereavement Service (Longniddry, 7pm).

Wednesday 24th December:

Christmas Eve Family Service (Longniddry, 7pm*);
Carols by Candlelight Service (Gladsmuir, 9.30pm).

Thursday 25th December:

Christmas Day Celebration (Longniddry, 10.30am*).

Sunday 28th December:

Joint service for the first Sunday after Christmas (Longniddry, 11am).

Sunday 4th January:

Joint service for Epiphany (Gladsmuir, 11am).

* Also on the "Gladsmuir & Longniddry Churches" YouTube channel.